

Dialogue

Women of the New Millennium: Tongan Women Determine Their Development Direction

CLARE BLEAKLEY

Making History, Becoming History: Reflections on Fijian Coups and Constitutions

BRIJ V LAL

From the Sideline: An Interview with Brij V Lal, Historian and Constitutional Commissioner

VILSONI HERENIKO

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The following interview was tape-recorded at the Australian National University on 21 September 2000.

VH: How long have you been here at the ANU (Australian National University) and why are you here instead of Fiji?

BL: I've been here since 1990. Before that, I was at the University of Hawai'i (UH). I left Fiji in 1983. The reason why I am at ANU and not at the University of Hawai'i has nothing to do with professional satisfaction, because UH was intellectually stimulating, with wonderful colleagues, especially at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies. But I came here in 1990 to write a book and my family decided that this is where they wanted to be. All of a sudden I discovered the joys of discovering the familiar contours of Anglo-Australasian culture with which I had grown up—the kind of texts we had read, the kind of people we had met. So this was a more familiar cultural surrounding to me than the States was. And the family liked it. Also, of course, Australia has cricket and rugby, and those things began to matter. Why not Fiji? I've always wanted to go back to Fiji, but the opportunity never came. Certainly if the Rabuka-Reddy coalition had won the elections, I would have been there and given up an academic career. From time to time, I've also wanted to return to the University of the South Pacific, but the continued political upheaval in Fiji and all that it entails for academic freedom dissuades me from going back to Fiji immediately.

VH: Let's go way back to your childhood. Tell me, where did you grow up, what school did you go to, and what inspired you to be the kind of person you are today?

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BL: I grew up on a small cane farm, ten acres of cane farm on leased native land. Both my parents were unlettered. We came from a big family of six boys and two girls. From very early on, it was very clear to us that there was no future on the farm for all six of us; our parents said, well you'd better get educated and become a clerk or cash earner in some capacity. The incentive to do well was always there, propelled by economic circumstances. My interest in history started very early. My grandfather was an indentured laborer and it just happened I was his favorite grandson. I used to sleep in his bed and take him around to do his ablutions, and so on. I heard stories about India, about his experiences on the plantations. Many of these were romanticized, but reinforced by the kind of cultural environment in which I was growing: essentially Indian, Hindu, and all of that. My curiosity about distant people and distant places started very early on. I was curious about these people; who were they, how did they come to Fiji? They spoke a funny language, they dressed differently. And then at primary school, I did reasonably well. I went to secondary school, had some very fine teachers. All of them have done very, very, well indeed: Vijay Mishra, professor of literature in Perth; Subramani, a professor at the university in Fiji; Krishna Dutt, my history teacher, who is a prominent public figure in Fiji; all of these people freshly graduated had a kind of dynamism. They took teaching seriously, they took you seriously, because in a sense your success reflected their own success as teachers or mentors. So early on my parents were supportive, partly out of necessity, economic necessity. My teachers were encouraging, interesting, interested. I suppose I had a natural curiosity; I mean, I wanted to become an English teacher. In high school we had novels I've mentioned in my books, English texts—Dickens, Bronte, Hardy, and so on. That imaginative world appealed to me. I suppose it was a form of escapism, from the dreary realities of poor life in the rural countryside. Then at university I met people who were extremely encouraging. One, whose political views I have always disagreed with, is Ron Crocombe. But Ron was a very stimulating kind of person. He provoked you, but he took you seriously as a scholar. My favorite teacher was a lady by the name of June Cook, a chain-smoking Englishwoman who came to Fiji after being at the United Nations. She was a professional historian. She read her lectures as a don would read a lecture at Oxford or Cambridge, and we took her seriously. I think the University of the South Pacific (USP) in the early days, let's say until about from the early-to-mid-seventies, was an interesting place to be because we were experimenting with a regional project. There was also a

deep concern among both staff and students to prove ourselves, that we were a first-rate academic institution. Just because we happened to be in the third world didn't mean that we were third rate. So this eagerness to prove our intellectual prowess, if you will, made a very exciting atmosphere and after USP I knew that I was hooked on the humanities and I haven't looked back.

VH: So where did you go after USP?

BL: I finished my USP degree in 1974, curiously before my three years. Then I applied to Walter Johnson, who was from the University of Hawai'i but teaching at USP, a very distinguished professor of history, former chairman at Chicago. He taught a course on recent American history. He saw some potential in me and asked me to apply to go to UH to become his teaching assistant in the World Civilization program. But UH rejected me. They rejected me because they said you only have a three-year degree and we have four years; we don't know about the caliber of teaching at USP. Besides, English is your second or third language, and so they rejected me for a teaching assistant. As it happened, the chairman of the history department of the University of British Columbia (UBC), Margaret Prang, was visiting USP. Ron Crocombe talked to her about me, and Margaret Prang said we'd like to have him and flew me over to UBC as a teaching assistant. Within about three weeks they gave me a graduate fellowship to complete my master's, which was in Chinese history. As it happened, at the end of my MA, when I graduated they gave me a prize for the most outstanding student in history. I remember very distinctly people at USP elated with my success because this was proof that the kind of graduates they were producing locally could do well outside. After that I went back to Fiji in 1976 and taught there for two years and then applied to get a scholarship to come to ANU, which I did. I arrived here in 1977 and finished my PhD in 1980, on the history of indenture, and then I went back to Fiji for a couple of years. For six months I was unemployed because there was no job for me at USP. But after that I decided I wanted to leave Fiji because I was not happy with the intellectual atmosphere there. I mean, having done a PhD at a university like ANU, which is rigorous and intellectually exciting, I felt that I was called on to play the role of a public figure, as one of the few doctorate locals at USP. I found that socially satisfying, but intellectually very, very arid. I felt that if I wanted to make a success of myself as an academic, I'd have to get away from USP. Maybe it was narrow-minded thinking on my part at that time, but

I felt I needed to prove myself somewhere else. And so I went to Hawai‘i, and after that I came to ANU.

VH: You say you joined the history departments in Hawai‘i and ANU? When did your interest in politics begin?

BL: When I went back to Fiji after finishing my PhD in the year 1982, when Fiji had its general election; it was a very tense period. There was a real possibility of a change of government because the Western United Front with Ratu Osea Gavidia had joined up with the National Federation Party. They were looking for someone to chair a radio broadcast, but no one would touch it, because it was so sensitive, and Fiji is such a small place. So they asked me. At first I hesitated, but I accepted the responsibility and I chaired those sessions, the panel discussions. I commented on the elections—my interest in electoral politics started from there. But at the same time, I suppose, living in my own country, I couldn’t really escape my responsibility to understand what was happening. I was a historian working on the nineteenth century, but I was living in the present. There was a need there for me to understand what was happening and also a responsibility and obligation to articulate it as I saw it. I think there’s a tension in my life: I inhabit the interface between scholarship and practical action. I can’t be one, I have to be emotionally engaged with something to be intellectually engaged with it. Those are the two things I have been doing. After I did the elections, a book came out of it, and I began to do both history and politics. I suppose living in Hawai‘i meant that I could write without looking over my shoulder to see who was approving or disapproving of what I was writing. There was no internal censorship. I wrote honestly and as objectively as I could, without any fear of persecution. I suppose if I was living in Fiji, subconsciously I would be aware of what I was writing. Being away from Fiji meant I was not aligned to any faction within different political parties. I suppose over time people began to read what I wrote. Some agreed, some disagreed, but at least they didn’t question my integrity or my credibility. Then in 1995 the constitution review exercise came. I think that was partly out of respect for what I was doing.

VH: Who approached you?

BL: I was approached by Mr Jai Ram Reddy, leader of the opposition, whom I had known a little bit. I later found out that he asked a number of people who might be the best candidate to represent the opposition. I

understand that my name was mentioned by many people, but they felt that while I had the intellectual strength and the ability and experience, I wasn't political enough. I didn't understand politics. Mr Reddy's position was that this was precisely the kind of person they wanted, who could at least try to understand things from the other side as well. To give us some fresh ideas; we don't want a puppet there. We want somebody who would be critical of what we are, what we have done, as well as understand and engage with issues of concern to other communities. It's a fact that a number of my former colleagues advised me against taking up the appointment because they said it was a farce, that nothing was going to come of it. "Do you think that the man who had done the coup would turn around and change the constitution?" So, there was cynicism, there was doubt, and good reason for it, given what had happened in the past. But I thought it was a challenge that I had to take up. I'm glad I did because five years later I have no regrets about what I did, or the recommendations we made.

VH: It was a huge responsibility put on your shoulders to be one of the architects of this constitution. Did you find that daunting at all?

BL: Yes! I was overwhelmed at times. The fact that I lived by myself for sixteen months, cooped up in a small apartment, simply intensified the pressure. I could not talk to anybody because the protocol required I keep my distance. I deliberately kept away. I never talked to any political leaders because it was not the right thing; I couldn't have done it anyway. So, I knew the history, I knew something about the task, but I wasn't fully aware of the enormity of what was there and the huge expectations. Everyone expected me to fail. Also there were many new areas I had to read about that I had never read before. International conventions, couched in legalistic kinds of terms about indigenous rights, political rights, and civil rights. Sometimes my interpretation of a document conflicted with somebody else's interpretation. The enormous amount of reading was exhausting. But I think the good thing about that exercise was that there were only three of us. There was no fallback. Sir Paul said to us that if you two agree among yourselves I won't stand in your way, and this is what happened. Mr Vakatora and I agreed on many things. We had to talk to each other, get to know each other, explore each other's fears and concerns with communities and the groups we represented. I think that promoted intense dialogue; if it had been a larger committee, people could have passed the buck. In this case there was no passing the buck, there were just two of us.

VH: Tell us very briefly about the other two on the committee, Mr Vakatora and Sir Paul.

BL: Mr Vakatora was a former speaker of the house, a cabinet minister, and a very senior public servant during the time of independence. A very, very hard politician, highly intelligent, he had been involved in the cabinet's draft, which laid the basis for the 1990 constitution. So he had been involved in this process beforehand. A lot of people told me that with him on the commission it was a sure sign that we would fail—because of his undeserved reputation for being very hard, an obstructionist. In the end we worked very hard and we became lifelong friends. I have the deepest admiration for him as a man, his intellect, and his integrity. Sir Paul didn't know Fiji, but he brought with him a wealth of goodwill, and his public persona was reassuring. He was a very good leader in the sense of not being frightened of receiving ideas from others. The fact that he was part Māori, the fact that he was a man of the cloth, the fact that he was a governor general, all of that and the fact that he had the confidence of both sides of politics certainly helped the process. Of course we had our legal counsel, who basically translated our thoughts into acceptable legalistic terms.

VH: During this time of working on the constitution, what would you say were the most important insights that you gained?

BL: There are many things. I think that one insight I gained was that people are not as far apart as was often made out. When we went to rural areas, right across Viti Levu from Sigatoka to Rakiraki, and other places in Vanua Levu as well, we many times heard Fijians and Indians telling us that at the village level we get along very well. We've lived together for a hundred years. We know each other, we speak each other's languages. A number of times Indo-Fijians came to us and wanted to make a submission in their own dialect. The problem, they said, was that in Suva politicians stand up and, for whatever reasons, espouse all kinds of extremist rhetoric and that filters down to the grassroots level. So honestly I believe that with proper leadership, people at grassroots level work together very well. I wish there were some kind of administrative mechanism to bring them together instead of having a provincial council for Fijians and advisory councils for Indo-Fijians. That's the first insight.

The second insight I got was that there is a deep respect for certain Fijian institutions among Indo-Fijians. The Great Council of Chiefs is one. Many people asked, What's wrong with having a Fijian as a president?

Nothing. We celebrate that. A lot of people said we wouldn't be able to sell that to the Indian community, but I was able to because that's something that I support. I'm quite content with the Fijian side of my heritage and I think, as you can see, everyone else approves of that in parliament.

The third insight came from what people said in private, not necessarily in public. From the prime minister down, including the Methodist Church in its formal presentation, people said that elections shouldn't take place from provincial boundaries because this accentuates provincialism. It's destructive, it's divisive, and it's counterproductive as far as Fijians are concerned. They want to go back to the constituency-based system of the 1970 constitution, because that provided more unity of focus and activity and so on. The impression I got was that there's a fear of provincialism resurfacing and increasing fragmentation of Fijian society, which is what happened in the 1999 election. So many Fijian political parties, and now with confederacy politics, have accepted provincial representation, so we are going that route. There was a great deal of understanding and tolerance, whether it was what people were just saying to us I don't know, but the sense I got was that with proper leadership we could have crossed the bridge.

VH: It seems to me that one of the main problems with the present situation is this crisis in leadership. One of the things you touched on is the separation between the chiefs and the common people. I think what has happened over the years is that the Fijian chiefs, many of them, have lost touch with the common people. At present in Fiji, there's no one person who stands out as being capable of leading the country, navigating the canoe through treacherous waters at this point in time. Would you say that is the problem?

BL: That is definitely a major problem. There are two problems here. Let's talk for the moment about Fijian community. The Fijian community is far more complex and divided now than it was in the past. Some 40–45 percent of the Fijian people are living in urban or peri-urban areas, where their interests and concerns and aspirations are different from those of their counterparts in rural areas. There's a sizable Fijian middle class, particularly after 1987, that has its own needs and agendas. The rural chiefs are unable to come to terms with this new reality caused by urbanization, migration, modern education, travel—the new horizons opening—and also interactions with the multiracial world of other communities. So you're talking about a complex, fluid society that's changing very, very rapidly. An institution that filled a particular need at a particular point in

time, is finding it very difficult now. But something else, which you touched on, which I think is very important about leadership: Among Fijians, all the way through the twentieth century, you had Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, then you had Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, then you had the four greats—Ratu Penaia Ganilau, Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Edward Cakobau, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara—people who were tutored to take over national leadership in the course of time, when Fiji became independent. These were chiefs who had an overarching kind of mana and influence right across the Fijian community and nationally. Even though Ratu Mara came from Lau, he was seen as a national leader. With his departure, we see the end of an era in Fijian leadership. What you'll find is that now people will gain their influence, their authority, and their mana from the provinces. Because of the resurgence of provincialism and confederacy politics, their larger influences seem to me to be more circumscribed. You may have a paramount chief from this area, a paramount chief from that area, but I don't see anyone on the horizon who has the makings of a national leader. The second thing is, you have commoners, not necessarily high chiefs, who will rise to the top. Their success in politics—Rabuka, Qarase, Filipe Bole, Kamikamica, whoever it is—will also bring a new dynamic to Fijian leadership. The question is not whether it's Fijians who are at the helm, but which Fijian, what kind of Fijian. These questions will be asked more and more now than in the past. In the past the Fijian interest was very clear. We knew who the Fijian leaders were. But not today. I think more questions are being asked and the answers contested, more so than in the past. On the Indo-Fijian side, there's also a dearth of leadership. From 1929 to 1969 we had A D Patel, S M Koya, and a few others. After the mid-1970s to 1999 we had Jai Ram Reddy and also Mahendra Chaudhry. But these are people in their sixties, and they are on their way out, eventually, in the next four, five, ten years. The best and the brightest of the Indo-Fijian community are leaving in the thousands. They're migrating. So what you have in Fiji is basically people who can't migrate, won't go, and that affects the kind of people who are thrown up as leaders. I think as far as leadership is concerned this is going to be an issue that people of Fiji will have to grapple with in the future.

VH: What is the ideal profile for a new leader for Fiji, one that may be able to grapple with the realities and the complexities of the present situation? What should be the characteristics of this leader?

BL: That's a question that's almost impossible to answer. I suppose one would need to have somebody who has the confidence of his or her own

community, but has a larger vision that encompasses others. One who is inclusive. But maybe time has moved on for one person as a single leader. Maybe time is now opportune for a collective kind of leadership—people with strengths in different areas. I don't think you're likely to see another Ratu Mara in your lifetime, that kind of experience and background. I don't know, the situation is so politicized, so fraught. The logic of politics in an ethnically divided society dictates that to win votes you have to take an extreme position, which is what happened in 1999. Rabuka and Reddy were seen to be trying to move to the center. They were outflanked on the one hand by other Fijian parties, and on the other, by Chaudhry. In an ethnically divided society, when you have moderate leaders coming together to forge a common ground, they will always be outflanked by racial extremists. That is a real challenge for leadership. People need to understand that in a society like Fiji we have to make progress cautiously. We must always be sensitive to many divergent interests and needs and different forms of discourse. The Fijian form of political discourse is indirect, illusive; the Indo-Fijian's based on a long tradition of robust democratic debate. And the two clash. What we need is a leader who understands some of the inner logic and inner dynamics of the other community, as well as his or her own.

VH: I think it was Rabuka who said that democracy is a foreign flower. It seems to me that the democratic process is one that doesn't suit Fiji. Thus, it's not very productive when everyone focuses on democratic principles. History seems to have shown us that if democracy is to work something has to be modified, to take into account the Fijian chiefly system, its hierarchical nature. For example, supposing there's a council of leaders consisting of conflicting factions, including members of the Indian community—something that seems rather attractive in the present situation. Is anyone considering alternatives?

BL: I think we need to have some kind of dialogue between representatives of the different communities. I think the Great Council of Chiefs missed a golden opportunity. For the first time, in the 1997 constitution the Great Council of Chiefs was constitutionally recognized. The expectation was that it would be representative not only of indigenous Fijian interests but also of national interests. That was our idea—a council of chiefs for Fiji. But not all Fijian chiefs were interested. So when the test came they failed. When George Speight's coup took place, they listened to Speight and his demands for political control and supremacy, but there

was no place at their table for any representative of the democratic voice. At the least, they should have said, we want to hear the other side as well before we make a decision. I think that's one thing that's disappointing. The other thing is, of course, that the Great Council of Chiefs was in some senses hijacked by younger chiefs and others with private political agendas and motivations. Some of the chiefs from rural areas did not have a full understanding of the complexities of what was happening. In a way, George Speight put a gun at the head of the Great Council of Chiefs. "You'll decide this, you'll appoint this person as the vice president and this person as the president." Then, when appointing the president, they were told, now you must appoint so and so as the prime minister. That, I think, undermined in some serious way the sanctity of the Great Council of Chiefs. I think they haven't come out of this crisis very well. I certainly hope that the Indo-Fijians will be able to get together and form a group of elders who are above party politics, to be able to deliberate on issues at the national level and in some sense create a liaison with the Great Council of Chiefs at an informal level. I think that's important, that kind of dialogue, regular dialogue at the grassroots level, the provincial level, and the national level, outside the political arena. That's very important. When you talk about democracy as a foreign flower, several things I would say: one is that Fiji never had democracy, in the sense that we understand the term. There are many models of democracy. For example, in Fiji the president is nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs. Half the senate is nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs. So many other things—land-ownership and so on—these things are outside the arena of politics. So Fiji's democracy has always grappled with and tried to accommodate special interests within a broadly overarching democratic polity. So democracy has many models. If democracy is a foreign flower, then there are many other foreign flowers as well. For example, Christianity is a foreign flower. In Fiji it is now a part of the indigenous culture. The truth is that democracy was fine as long as they were winning—1966 to 1987. It failed when they failed to win. That's the second thing. The third thing is: What would you put in place of democracy? Theocracy? Ethnocracy? I think that the way forward for Fiji is to do two things. One is to acknowledge the sanctity, the authority, and the power of certain indigenous Fijian things. That's absolutely vital, and that's what we did in our report. We have got to acknowledge that. Sometimes it comes very close to breaching international conventions, but we said no, the president should be a Fijian, and everyone should accept that. This is an explicit acknowledg-

ment of Fijians' special place and control over those institutions by Fijians. All of this should happen within the broadly overarching framework of equal citizenship. There must be respect for individual rights. You see, I come back to the point that indigenous Fijians are divided and diverse in their lifestyles, their orientations, their ideologies, and their values. In the long run, democracy will be good for them. Democracy here means the right to exercise individual choice to vote. Given the enormous diversity, and given increasing urbanization and other factors, the Indo-Fijian population is likely to decline significantly. Already we are in the 40 percent range; in the next ten years we are likely to be in the 30s. So the Indo-Fijian presence wouldn't be a big factor in the way it was in Fiji politics for much of the twentieth century. While we must have institutions and organizations at different levels to facilitate discourse outside the arena of active politics, at the same time, I don't know what would be a better alternative to democracy, the ballot box, the parliament, and all of that.

VH: We have to take into account that people like Rabuka or George Speight, acting on their own accord or as pawns of other interests, were able to walk into parliament and wrest control of power. On the other hand, the majority of people appear happy to deal with their own grievances within the constitution, but once you've got someone like Rabuka or George Speight taking over parliament, then all the repressed or suppressed feelings of people come to the surface and the response becomes a very emotional rather than a rational one. So yes, I think the democratic process can work for most people, but how do we take care of people like Rabuka or Speight? How do we prevent anything like that ever happening again?

BL: No constitution can prevent a coup. That's a given. I think there's no guarantee that coups won't take place in Fiji or elsewhere. What's happened in Fiji, and this is my judgment, is that there was dissatisfaction right across the country, especially among the Fijians, with the style of Chaudhry's administration. It was seen as confrontational; it was seen as doing too many things too quickly. People felt rushed; Chaudhry was in a rush to deliver, having made those costly promises during the campaign. Chaudhry is a strong trade union leader, and a trade union has its own culture of dealing with problems. For instance, the end is really the important thing, the means is neither here nor there. Dissatisfaction was widespread. I also have the sense that many people were saying, well let's give him a chance and see. Some people were unwilling to wait, including a

number of groups—one is diehard nationalists who basically believed that Fiji should always be run by Fijians, the Butadroka group. Another group is people who were defeated at the polls, who sought revenge. They will use any excuse; I am thinking of Apisai Tora, for example; he will support any cause that will support Tora. So there's a politics of revenge. There are also people who missed out under the policies of globalization. In that category are also people who were fast-tracked to promotion, or benefited from racially accommodated action programs, and they wanted to reach the top right away. There were well-connected businessmen and others who felt their ambitions thwarted by this new government with its own network and its own clientele. All of these people supported the coups, but at the end of the day I have a sense that they had their own agendas and they exploited the confused and innocent emotions of people. There was already a kind of substratum of dissatisfaction—somehow things were not right—and they tapped into that.

VH: Do you think there's something that's very particular or specific to Fijian culture that makes it seem so easy, during times of tension in Fiji, not to follow the rule of law, but somehow resort to something very primal?

BL: We are a multiethnic society. We've practiced the politics of communalism for nearly a century. So we've always practiced compartmentalized communal politics—our group first and the nation second. That reinforces feelings of primordiality and all of that and suspicion of the other group. Way back in the 1960s you always had the cry, "If Fijians don't unite, Indians will take their land away," and that was enough of a rallying cry for people to come together. Race was always used as a political mobilizing tool, so when this kind of thing happens—a new government comes into power that is perceived to be anti-Fijian—they go back and say, Fijians have had it again; this is our country. Yet these people don't realize that Rabuka was in power in 1990 and the same people threw him out. There is now a reservoir of suspicion and mutual hostility that can be tapped into for any particular purpose. In that context the appeal for support is achieved most successfully.

VH: One of the things that amazed me was the initial reaction from the Fijian community once Speight had taken over parliament. You would think that the leadership would be against it immediately and denounce it. By not doing that they seemed to be endorsing Speight's actions. One way

of reading that would be to say, well the majority of Fijians approve, even though they may tell us in public that they don't.

BL: I agree that what began as an individual action of a group of people carrying out this coup later on, through propaganda and through the media, became part of the larger rhetoric of "This is for the Fijian interest, for the land," and so on. I think over time it developed a momentum of its own. I mentioned the Great Council of Chiefs, who, in my judgment, failed to exercise the leadership that was expected of them and that they wanted themselves. I think that the army certainly was divided. They dithered, and the Fijian people will pay a huge price for this in the future, because Fijians have shown that when push comes to shove, their loyalty is to the *vanua*, to the chiefs, not to the institution of the army. I think that is a very dangerous thing. That is why I've argued that the army needs more outsiders to act as a buffer, more Rotumans, maybe more Indo-Fijians in the army. It's an important fact. I think security forces show that they did not really live up to expectations. The judiciary caved in, abolishing the Supreme Court by decree. I myself think the president failed in his leadership by tinkering with the constitution when he had no authority to do so, giving George Speight and the Great Council of Chiefs "his personal guarantee that things would be done to their satisfaction" when he, as president, had no legal authority to do that. So the institutions collapsed, or were compromised. Maybe deep down they sided with Mr Speight and what he stood for. Which leads me to my next point: The very same people who dithered and silently supported Speight now single him out as a traitor. They want him tried for treason. My argument always has been that while Speight must face up to the consequences of his actions, he's not the only one. Other institutions and individuals, for whom Speight was a front man, should also be held accountable. The very same people who are benefiting from what Speight did are now turning on him saying he is the culprit, just as in 1987, they expected Rabuka to do the deed and move out. Of course he didn't. In this case, Speight has done the deed and he's now being tried by the very same people who are benefiting from his actions. There's an element of hypocrisy, an element of trying to show the world that things are returning to normal, but of course, they're not, because singling Speight out, scapegoating, and brushing things under the carpet will not work.

VH: Are you suggesting then that these people should not have benefited at all, or that George Speight should not be tried? What is a better way of responding to the situation?

BL: I think he should be tried; there's no question in my mind about that. Rabuka went free and then we had Speight; if he goes free, there'll be somebody else. That's the lesson of our recent history. What I am suggesting is there ought to be a deep and sincere investigation, something like a truth commission. What happened? Why didn't things work out? Did the 1997 constitution fail? What did we do wrong? What do we need to do now to prevent such acts from happening in the future? That kind of soul searching. Where have the Indians fallen short? What should they do? What more should they do to become fully accepted as part of society? Are there shortcomings within Fijian society that prevent it from dealing with the demands and realities of a modern, commercial, globalized world? Rather than focusing on simply another affirmative action policy here, more seats there, we need to grapple with those real questions. The 1997 constitution was widely approved after thorough consultation, blessed by the Great Council of Chiefs, and approved unanimously by the parliament. What went wrong? Do we need to throw the rule book out just because a team loses the game? What kinds of rules are necessary for the questions you were asking early on? Maybe we should look at alternative models. What alternative models, that our commission didn't look at, might they look at? That kind of thing is very important, but I honestly believe Mr Speight should be tried. I'm just saying that he's not the only one, and people need to understand that there's a wider network. One doesn't necessarily have to be accusatory and vindictive, but the need to understand is absolutely vital.

VH: Do you think there are people in Fiji who can be objective or neutral, or do you think these people will have to come from outside?

BL: I think there'll be resistance to outsiders. It's a natural reaction to outsiders who judge us by other standards. So if there's consensus you could get some distinguished person from the region who understands the Pacific region and its cultures, one who is trusted by people, to be a part of this exercise. I have noticed that we don't use our own people often enough. What about someone like Michael Somare from Papua New Guinea or Jeremiah Tabai from Kiribati?

VH: I find it interesting that both those two you mention are not Fijians. Are you including them as insiders?

BL: What I'm saying is that if you're going to have outsiders, then get people from the region who have long experience, understand the situation, and can lend a helping hand. But as members of this commission or

this group, the majority will have to come from Fiji itself. They must not be tokens. They must be representatives chosen by the different communities, and they must rise above politics. Look at where we went wrong, tell us. Go and look at other experiences, if you want to. This is what happened with our commission. We were put there by two different groups and yet we were able to rise above politics, the kind of groups that supported us. It is possible. I really do think that there are people in the community, people of goodwill, and foresight.

VH: Do you think this is being done or going to be done?

BL: I hope the government will do it. There is a ministry for reconciliation headed by the interim prime minister himself. I hope he will have the foresight and vision to appoint people who may not necessarily agree with him but will have the courage and independence to say what they think. I think that kind of soul searching, that kind of talking through these things is very important. The atmosphere is extremely polarized in Fiji right now. People are hurt, and the anguish is there, but I think it is important to now start the process of reconciliation. The best way to go about it is to choose respected citizens, who have the confidence of the people. Where did we go wrong and how can we prevent future actions like this?

VH: So when you review the constitution and the work that the three of you accomplished, how do you feel about the constitution now? If you could make changes, what would you change, if anything?

BL: The 1997 constitution says some things that are different from the report we wrote, especially in respect to the composition of parliament and the executive. We recommended that the president should be an indigenous Fijian, nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs, elected by both houses of parliament. I think that is a good thing. That's something that I'd like to see in the constitution. We recommended that two-thirds of the seats be national seats and be contested from three-member constituencies, and that people be forced to make alliances at that level. They reversed that by saying two-thirds should be communal and one-third open. If there is some doubt in people's minds about the system of voting, let's look at it again. Although people are critical of the 1997 constitution, one thing it recommends is compulsory power sharing. The constitution provides that any political party with more than 10 percent of seats in parliament is constitutionally entitled to be invited to be part of cabinet, which I think is a good thing. That's why the Fijian Association went in. The Soqosoqo

ni Vakuvalewa ni Taukei (svt) is crying foul, unconvincingly, because they were invited. Instead they wanted a number of portfolios, which are the prime minister's prerogative. He invited them to participate—the allocation of portfolios is a matter of negotiation—instead, the svt demanded terms and conditions. I do not know of any other constitution for a similarly situated ethnically divided society where indigenous concerns and rights are as well protected without breaching democratic principles.

vh: Fiji has ethnic groups other than the Fijians and the Indians. I think we've talked quite a bit about the Fijian and Indian communities particularly, but I wonder if you have any thoughts about the Rotuma situation, particularly at this time. It seems to me that over the years, Rotuma has been treated as a colony of Fiji. Given the present climate in Fiji, maybe Rotuma might consider exploring some other kind of relationship with Fiji, one perhaps that will give it more autonomy, something akin to a compact of free association with Fiji. Do you think this is something that Rotuma should consider?

bl: This is an issue that came up before the commission in 1995, when we traveled to Rotuma and received a number of submissions. There were several concerns. One is that there was an independence movement led by Mr Gibson. There was a faction that wanted independence—not only them but Wallis and Futuna and other places like Rabi as well. So the independence action was certainly canvassed. But there are many Rotumans who didn't want it, because, they pointed out, 70 percent of Rotumans live in Fiji. They are part of the Fiji economy. Let me put it this way: we recommended that the issue of independence is for the people of Rotuma to decide. I think we also favored the idea of some kind of compact of free association that gives Rotuma greater autonomy while maintaining some kind of relationship with Fiji where you can come and work and so on. I think we were very sensitive about that; we did not dismiss the issue out of hand. We felt that it is something the people of Rotuma should work through. Fiji's interest in this is economic, the two-hundred-mile economic zone, that's what it's all about. A lot of Fijians would say, "Well, if Rotumans want independence, go to Rotuma," but many are Fiji citizens. I think that's not the issue; the issue is here's an island that is far away, in public consciousness as well as physically. If they want greater autonomy, the commission certainly favored that, and we felt that they should explore some kind of compact with Fiji, perhaps the kind of relationship Tokelau has with New Zealand, for example. We were very sympathetic.

VH: What are your political plans now in relation to Fiji? Do you have intentions of going back and becoming actively involved in trying to figure out where Fiji should go or how it should resolve its problems?

BL: I had my opportunity. I have said what I think is appropriate. Emotionally Fiji will always be a part of me. That will always be there. I think that active politics is probably out now. The shadow lengthens and one is conscious of the small amount of time that's left. I really want to do other things. Eventually, after writing a biography of Jai Ram Reddy—a story of Fiji politics from 1970 to 1999, a period when I myself came of age and was involved in some capacity with Fiji's politics—I'll probably not go back to Fiji. I want to work on a multivolume history of Australian relations with the Pacific from 1800 to 2000, because I live here now. I'd like to explain this part of the world to people in this country because Australia has been a dominant power in this region. That's one thing I want to do. Then I'd like to write some fiction. It's difficult but I'll try. I don't see myself being in academia for very long. I've had a good run. If something better comes up I'll certainly think about it. For the time being academic life seems to be the best alternative I have.